Greek Muslims: Gradual easing of stalemate

By Bruce Clark

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Having grown up on a one-hectare farm in northern Greece, 29-year-old Ali is an impressive example of upward mobility. He read architecture at a foreign university and expects to work in that field soon, once the authorities in Athens endorse his degree.

His sister has gone abroad to study medicine, and hopes to practise her profession in her native Greece. One of their friends is a lively 27-year-old woman who chats eagerly about the computer programming business that she and her husband plan to start in their home town.

What makes this story unusual is that all the people involved are Turkish-speaking Muslims from the north-eastern province of Thrace, part of a minority that has often been a diplomatic football between Athens and Ankara. Like almost all the high achievers in their community, these young people completed their education in Turkey.

Had they been born a few years earlier, they would have planned their careers almost anywhere but Greece, because their ethnic and religious background would have made it difficult to register a company, obtain a professional licence, or even to rent or construct a building.

Most of these obstacles have been removed, but arguments over their community's welfare, status and even its precise composition still sputter on, in Athens and Ankara, and are involving European institutions to an increasing extent.

But the emergence, albeit on a small scale, of a new class of professionally successful Muslim Greek citizens, bilingual in Turkish and Greek, is helping to change the grudging inter-communal stalemate that made the tobacco country of north-eastern Greece a tense, sullen and slow-moving place.

The fact that Greece is well entrenched in the European Union, while Turkey may have many years to wait for membership, has made Greece a much more attractive place to plan a career. The legal guarantees offered by European institutions have increased the confidence of Muslim Greek citizens that they will not face intolerable discrimination.

But the issue of minority rights has been a sensitive one in both Greece and Turkey since the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. This provided for a massive compulsory exchange of religious minorities but spared the Ottoman Muslims of Thrace and the Orthodox Christians of Istanbul, with specific guarantees for their cultural and religious rights.

Even the terminology needed to discuss minority issues is controversial. The Greek state acknowledges having a 100,000-strong Muslim minority in the region of Thrace, of whom the majority speak Turkish. But Athens has insisted, for the past 20 years, that the word Turkish must not be used to describe the community as a whole - or even institutions within the community. This policy has been challenged at the Greek supreme court, and many observers believe it will be overturned sooner or later by the European Court of Human Rights.

Names and labels are one source of contention between the Greek government on one hand, and community leaders in Thrace, backed by Ankara, on the other. A second is the Muslim community's demand that their muftis, who act as judges in matters of family law, should be elected rather than appointed by the Greek state.

A third issue is posed by Muslim complaints of excessive Greek government interference in the management of their religious foundations, or vakoufs, from which the salaries of muftis and Muslim teachers are paid.

However, the policy priority of the Athens government has been to advance the educational achievements, within the Greek system, of the minority. Hundreds of teachers and academics have been drawn into an EU-assisted programme designed to boost the ability of young Muslims to read, write and function in Greek.

About 160 Thracian Muslims a year now enter Greek universities. That is some improvement on the 1980s, when not a single Muslim had completed a Greek high school. The number would be higher still if the "affirmative action" quota - setting aside 0.5 per cent of university places for Muslims - were fully taken up.

Thanks to the EU-backed Programme for the Education of Muslim Children, the previously abysmal performance of Thrace's 240 "minority primary schools" has improved. Pupils are being taught Greek as a foreign language, reflecting the reality that in country districts, many arrive at school knowing barely a word of their country's official tongue.

This in turn makes it easier for them to enter Greek state high schools - and to get round the problem posed by the virtual absence of secondary education (apart from two private schools) geared to the minority's needs. About 3,000 Muslim youngsters now attend Greek government high schools. Until very recently, many members of the community - especially girls - either left school at 12, or went to Turkey for secondary education. "Ever since it became clear that Greek universities were open to Muslim candidates, the demand from parents to educate their children within the Greek system became stronger," says Dr Thalia Dragona, an educational psychologist and co-founder of the education programme. "Greek society has a strong ethos of self-improvement and Muslims share that."

However, the fact that young Muslims are doing better in the Greek environment will not satisfy all the community's demands. They want some provision for the Turkish language, and Islam, in schools. In due course, say Greek officials, Turkish may be introduced as a second language in high schools at least.

The policy on education is one encouraging sign that Greece may be turning into a society where Muslims can plan their future without fear of discrimination from the authorities. The harder question is how well minorities can be accepted by Greek society, where for most of the last century people were taught that the country was home to a single language and ethnicity - Greek - and a single religion, Orthodox Christianity.

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